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# Helping to Feed and Educate

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Media Studies

Essay #1

### Helping to Feed and Educate

It's become painfully clear, especially for liberal arts students themselves, that a liberal arts education may be taking a hit right now, in the face of an economic downfall and an emphasis on specialized learning. However cultural knowledge is still largely valued and there are not many places that demonstrate that fact better than the internet, where all kinds of information is at a person's fingertips and Google can make anyone an expert. With that being the case, the first element of the popular website Freerice.com is not unusual; players arrive at the website and answer questions in subjects such as vocabulary, art, geography, math, and literature. What's unusual about Freerice is the second element, stating that with each question answered correctly, the non-profit website, through the profit gained by banner ads, will donate ten grains of rice to the United Nations Food Programme, thereby helping to combat world hunger.

Founded in 2007 by John Breen and donated within two year to the UN World Food Programme, the website is now associated with both the frontline agency which distinction of being the world's largest humanitarian organization, as well as the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. Having donated over 91 million grains to date to countries such as Uganda, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Haiti, Freerice makes claims to have fed millions of people since its launch, solely through the actions of individual players. At its most basic, Breen and now the UN World Food Programme state their main tenant of Freerice as "helping to feed

and educate.” Certainly those goals can function together and with success, as Freerice and many other organizations have demonstrated. Knowledge is doubtlessly a symbol for empowerment, and Freerice has smoothly made that empowerment tangible by giving each player the tools to see concrete good as a result of their actions.

This uncensored idealism reflects a sort of Arnoldian notion of culture: the concept of “culture” as improvement is at work as the individual player’s knowledge builds with each question. When a player gets a question wrong, the question is simply repeated until the player gets it right as the level of difficulty increases, creating a real sense of improvement. Of course, the far over-reaching message of culture as improvement is demonstrated through the larger idea that as individuals improve their own knowledge of cultural symbols, they are actually improving the lives of those in needs. There is a direct link made between knowledge and livelihood, and for Arnold culture “moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good.” In fact the website notes that there are only two goals for the non-profit, to provide education for everyone for free, and to help end world hunger by providing rice to hungry people for free.

Freerice gives voice to another one of Arnold’s idealistic notions, the idea that culture should connect us and give people a common language. In its wide array of subjects, Freerice offers the likes of various language learning vocabularies, as well as geography questions including the identification of countries on the map and flags of the world. With groups and individual players all over the world, Freerice offers a tiny slice of cultural knowledge that is meant to be shared by everyone in order to unite against a worldwide epidemic. The website itself has even gone through more transition from individuals playing in isolation, to a web design which allows more of a community effort allowing players to sign in, create groups, and

play the game with friends. In a true sense of integration, the top five groups currently sharing the lead in donating rice are as follows, #1 Donator, QWANTZ, Pro-Marijuana Helpers, Atheists Giving Aid, and Christians Fighting World Hunger. Certainly these groups would appear to agree on very little, and yet they are answering the same question concerning the meaning of the word “suave,” united in their apparent motivation to end world hunger.

It’s easy to become entranced by the uplifting and almost painfully romantic message that Freerice communicates and the concrete benefit, however large or small, that it is having in the world. However in returning to that original tenet, “to feed and educate,” the world educate and the ways in which one can become educated are immediately suspect on the level of media and culture production. In the example of the groups above, on one level they are working together, but at the same time as Freerice creates player statistics and allows increased group activity there is also a heightened sense of competition created. Even as Freerice builds more of a community the foundation of knowledge gain is still an individual one. Similarly, the website offers a plethora of subjects which can in some ways act as a bridge and a common language, and yet there is still a distinction between what knowledge is important and what knowledge is unimportant. Freerice doesn’t offer to educate a person in anything that they choose to be educated in; it offers education in language learning, humanities, geography, English, math, and chemistry. Certainly those subjects cover a lot of ground, but it is still for the most part offering a perspective of education from a Western academic standpoint. It’s not truly a common language; rather it’s a reinforcement of knowledge that is deemed culturally important.

Clearly Freerice works on a level beyond the idealistic motivators for change, and plays to deeper social and psychological constructions. Returning to the Arnold quotation concerning the force of culture, it’s the search for knowledge but even more so it’s the acknowledgement of

knowledge that is valued. When a player gets a question wrong, the question gets repeated until the players get it right. There is surely learning happening, and there is also self-satisfaction. The game gets increasingly challenging but it also invariably allows the player to be right. Likewise, there is a clear moral and social passion to do good enacted behind the fun, and there are even more resources for fighting against world hunger beyond the game offered. However it's common to almost forget why you are playing, forget that you are donating rice to people who are literally starving as you're playing, because the game itself becomes so addicting and all-consuming. It's almost as if the medium itself, at its most basic an online game, takes a false need that has already become a common part of culture and translates it into addressing a real need and real resources.

And perhaps that is the true genius of Freerice. It seems to understand people's motivations, their priorities. Of course everyone wants to help the starving, the poor, the weak, but what people really want is quick fix. Something that a person can do between classes or after work that will make them feel as if they've made a contribution. It often seems as if the only way to see a mainstream reaction to a problem in our modern age is to commercialize it, to allow it to take on ideological tendencies as it spreads through the culturally constructed media. For example the "green" movement is often criticized as becoming a popular slogan or cause with no real motivation or passion behind it. However if packaging a problem in a commercial ways and playing to certain cultural and psychological tendencies is what it takes to get the problem into mainstream consciousness, then the production would appear to be worth it.

Freerice appears to offer a band-aid solution to world hunger. The truth is, world hunger is not going to end solely through the efforts of Freerice and individuals testing their vocabulary. It's important to make a difference, but it's also important to commit to ending a problem and

not just improving it. However, while Freerice perhaps fails to get the public to act in such a way that would mean world hunger actually has a change of being eradicated, it's still spreading an important message and using education, however vulnerable, to do so. Perhaps most importantly for Freerice is the question that it hopefully inspires, a question beyond the mathematics, vocabulary, and geography. If all it takes to feed a person through one website is answering a few questions, then are people still starving? It is being encouraged to think, sometimes regardless of the subject, which garners such questions and encourages real action.